

Self-Actualization Predicts Lower Everyday Worry: A Positive Psychology Perspective

Kaiwei Bai¹

¹ Chaoyang District, Beijing, People's Republic of China

Correspondence: Kaiwei Bai (kaiwei888@yahoo.com)

ABSTRACT - Worry is commonly linked to anxiety, intolerance of uncertainty, and reduced well-being, but less is known about protective factors. This study examined whether self-actualization, a construct reflecting authenticity, autonomy, and purposeful engagement, might buffer against everyday worry. Undergraduate students ($N = 154$; M age = 23.07, $SD = 7.25$; 84 women, 65 men) completed the Short Index of Self-Actualization and the Worry Domains Questionnaire. Higher self-actualization was significantly associated with lower overall worry ($r = -.56, p < .01$). Domain-specific regression analyses controlling for age and gender confirmed that self-actualization predicted lower worry in relationship and self-concept-related domains. Findings suggest that self-actualization might function as a psychological resource that reduces vulnerability to repetitive concerns. Integrating protective factors such as self-actualization into models of worry may broaden understanding and inform interventions that promote resilience and authentic engagement.

Keywords:

Self-actualization;
Worry; Resilience;
Authenticity; Coping;
Positive psychology;
Protective factors

Introduction

Research on worry has traditionally emphasized its maladaptive aspects, linking persistent worry to anxiety disorders, cognitive biases, and decreased well-being (Borkovec et al., 1998; Hirsch & Mathews, 2012; Wells, 1995). In clinical contexts, worry has been closely tied to generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and to dysfunctional patterns of repetitive thought that interfere with emotional regulation (Molina & Borkovec, 1994; Newman et al., 2013). This perspective has generated important insights into the mechanisms that sustain chronic worry, including intolerance of uncertainty, selective attention to threat, and avoidance of emotional processing (Dugas et al., 1998; Ladouceur et al., 2000).

Yet this focus on pathology leaves open the question of how worry may intersect with broader aspects of positive psychological functioning. At moderate levels, worry may serve adaptive purposes such as motivating preparation, promoting vigilance, and signaling the need for problem solving (Sibrava & Borkovec, 2006). Moreover, worry is not evenly distributed across individuals. Some people worry

excessively in ways that impair functioning, while others maintain relatively low worry despite encountering comparable life stressors. Understanding why some individuals are less vulnerable to worry requires examining psychological resources that may buffer against it.

Self-Actualization as a Protective Factor

One such resource may be self-actualization. Emerging from Maslow's (1943, 1970) humanistic theory of motivation, self-actualization refers to the process of realizing one's potential, pursuing meaningful goals, and living authentically. Maslow described self-actualized individuals as autonomous, creative, reality-oriented, and capable of maintaining deeper interpersonal relationships. Later empirical research operationalized self-actualization through validated instruments such as the Short Index of Self-Actualization (SISA; Jones & Crandall, 1986). Higher self-actualization scores have been linked to life satisfaction, vitality, psychological well-being, and resilience in the face of stress (Ryff, 1989; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Schmutte & Ryff, 1997).

Importantly, self-actualization represents more than the absence of pathology; it reflects the presence of growth-oriented qualities such as authenticity, purpose, and intrinsic motivation (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). These qualities may shape how individuals appraise and respond to potential stressors. For example, someone with a strong sense of autonomy and competence may interpret challenges as opportunities for growth rather than as threats to be feared. In turn, this mindset could reduce the frequency or intensity of worry across everyday domains.

Worry as a Multifaceted Construct

To explore this possibility, it is useful to consider how worry is measured outside of clinical contexts. The Worry Domains Questionnaire (WDQ; Tallis et al., 1992) assesses frequency of nonclinical worry content across five everyday domains: relationships, lack of confidence, aimless future, work, and financial matters. Unlike measures of pathological worry such as the Penn State Worry Questionnaire (PSWQ; Meyer et al., 1990), the WDQ captures the content of everyday concerns in a way that highlights variation across individuals. Research using the WDQ has shown that domain-specific worry predicts distress, avoidance behavior, and lower well-being, even in nonclinical samples (Hong, 2007; Startup & Erickson, 2006).

Although occasional worry in these domains may be adaptive—for example, worrying about finances may motivate saving money—excessive or chronic worry undermines functioning by consuming cognitive resources and restricting flexibility (Davey & Wells, 2006). Individuals high in worry often exhibit attentional biases toward threat, intolerance of uncertainty, and rumination, which further perpetuate distress (Laugesen et al., 2003; Carleton, 2016). Thus, worry represents a meaningful target for understanding how psychological strengths such as self-actualization might reduce vulnerability to negative emotional cycles.

Possible Links Between Self-Actualization and Worry

There are several reasons to expect an inverse relationship between self-actualization and worry. Firstly, more self-actualized individuals tend to appraise stressors as challenges rather than threats (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). They are more likely to use problem-focused coping strategies, which promote a sense of efficacy and reduce worry (Park et al., 2004). By contrast, low self-actualization may be linked to reliance on avoidance or emotion-focused coping, both of which may be associated with higher levels of worry (Holahan & Moos, 1987).

Secondly, Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory suggests that fulfillment of psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhances resilience. Individuals who are intrinsically motivated and oriented toward personal growth may be less susceptible to excessive worry because their

sense of security is derived internally rather than from external contingencies. This aligns with findings that resilience and positive affect can buffer against perseverative thought (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

Thirdly, Worry often emerges from doubts about one's adequacy or concerns about social evaluation (Wells, 1995). Self-actualization, however, entails authenticity and acceptance of the self, which may mitigate such doubts. For example, higher authenticity has been linked to lower social anxiety and greater psychological adjustment (Goldman & Kernis, 2002), suggesting that self-actualized individuals may worry less about interpersonal rejection or competence.

Fourthly, whereas worry is characterized by uncontrollable future-oriented thoughts (Borkovec et al., 1998), self-actualization entails purposeful goal pursuit and confidence in one's trajectory (Maslow, 1970). This sense of direction may counteract the aimlessness that often underlies excessive worry about the future.

Although few studies have directly examined the relationship between self-actualization and worry, related findings are suggestive. For instance, higher levels of psychological well-being and meaning in life predict lower rumination and worry (Zacher & Staudinger, 2011). Similarly, studies of mindfulness—a construct overlapping with authenticity and self-awareness—show that greater mindful awareness is associated with reduced worry and better emotion regulation (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Roemer et al., 2009). These converging findings support the possibility that self-actualization, as a broader positive psychological orientation, may serve as a buffer against everyday worry.

The Present Study

To date, the connection between self-actualization and worry has received little direct empirical attention. The present study addresses this gap by examining correlations between self-actualization, assessed by the Short Index of Self-Actualization (Jones & Crandall, 1986), and everyday worry, assessed by the Worry Domains Questionnaire (Tallis et al., 1992).

Two hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis 1. Self-actualization will be negatively associated with overall levels of everyday worry. Individuals with higher self-actualization are expected to report lower worry across multiple life domains, reflecting their more adaptive coping, stronger sense of purpose, and greater authenticity.

Hypothesis 2. The negative association between self-actualization and worry will be strongest in interpersonal and confidence-related domains. These domains are most closely tied to self-concept, authenticity, and intrinsic motivation, all of which are central to self-actualization. By contrast, domains such as finances or work, which are more externally determined, may show weaker associations.

By situating worry within a positive psychology framework, this study highlights the potential protective role of self-actualization and contributes to a more integrative understanding of individual differences in everyday worry. In doing so, it extends research beyond the deficit model of worry and toward a balanced account that considers how human strengths interact with vulnerability.

Method

Participants

Participants were 154 undergraduate students (84 women, 65 men) enrolled at a mid-sized university. Ages ranged from 18 to 55 years ($M = 23.07$, $SD = 7.25$). Participants were recruited from social science courses.

Measures

Short Index of Self-Actualization (SISA; Jones & Crandall, 1986). Self-actualization was assessed using the 15-item SISA, which captures characteristics such as autonomy, authenticity, and openness to

experience. Responses are made on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 6 (“strongly agree”), with higher scores reflecting greater self-actualization. The SISA has demonstrated adequate internal consistency (as typically .65–.75) and convergent validity with related constructs such as autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and openness (Jones & Crandall, 1986; Leclerc et al., 1999).

Worry Domains Questionnaire (WDQ; Tallis et al., 1992). Everyday worry was measured using the WDQ, a 25-item instrument assessing the extent of worry across five domains: relationships, lack of confidence, aimless future, work, and financial matters. Items are rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“extremely”), with higher scores indicating greater worry. Subscale scores and a total score can be computed. Prior studies report high reliability for the WDQ (total $\alpha \approx .90$; subscales typically .70–.85) and evidence of construct validity through associations with trait anxiety and the Penn State Worry Questionnaire (Tallis et al., 1992; Hong, 2007).

Sociodemographics. Participants provided information on age and gender.

Procedure

Data were collected through an online survey administered via a secure questionnaire platform. After providing informed consent, participants completed the SISA, the WDQ, and demographic questions. Participants received a small amount of course credit for their participation. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and received ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board.

Data Analysis

Zero-order correlations were computed to examine associations between self-actualization and overall worry, as well as worry within each of the WDQ domains. To test the hypotheses more formally, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted, controlling for sociodemographic variables (age, gender). Predictors were entered simultaneously. All analyses were conducted using SPSS (Version 28). Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 level (two-tailed).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and reliability coefficients for the SISA, WDQ total, and WDQ subscales are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and reliabilities for study measures

Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
SISA	62.74	9.09	.671
WDQ Total	52.43	15.63	.919
WDQ Relationships	9.59	3.59	.738
WDQ Confidence	10.49	4.33	.848
WDQ Future	10.03	3.86	.768
WDQ Work	10.59	3.41	.729
WDQ Finances	11.72	4.59	.860

Note: $N = 154$. WDQ = Worry Domains Questionnaire; SISA = Short Index of Self-Actualization.

Correlations

Zero-order correlations between SISA scores and WDQ scores are displayed in Table 2. As displayed in the table, the correlation results indicate that higher levels of self-actualization were consistently associated with lower levels of worry across all domains. The strongest associations emerged for worries related to relationships and confidence, suggesting that individuals who feel more authentic and self-fulfilled tend to experience less concern in areas closely tied to self-concept and interpersonal functioning. Worries about the future and work also showed substantial associations, while financial worries demonstrated the weakest, though still meaningful, link with self-actualization. Overall, the findings highlight a broad inverse relationship between self-actualization and everyday worry, with certain personal and interpersonal domains showing the most pronounced connections.

Table 2: Correlations between self-actualization and worry domains

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. SISA						
2. WDQ Total	-.56**					
3. WDQ Relationships	-.56**	.81**				
4. WDQ Confidence	-.58**	.81*	.69**			
5. WDQ Future	-.49**	.85**	.64**	.64**		
6. WDQ Work	-.36**	.74**	.52**	.48**	.54**	
7. WDQ Finances	-.24**	.74**	.41**	.40**	.55**	.47**

Note: $N = 154$. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$. WDQ = Worry Domains Questionnaire; SISA = Short Index of Self-Actualization.

Regression Analyses

Hierarchical regression analyses indicated that, after controlling age and gender, relationships and confidence worry domains predicted significant independent variance in self-actualization (Table 3). Associations with aimless future, work, and financial worry were weaker and nonsignificant.

Table 3: Regression results for worry domains predicting self-actualization

Variable	β	t	p
Age	-.06	0.88	.380
Gender	.12	1.84	.067
WDQ Relationships	-.24	2.48	.014
WDQ Confidence	-.37	3.86	<.001
WDQ Future	-.11	1.06	.289
WDQ Work	-.05	0.56	.579
WDQ Finances	.08	0.94	.347
$\Delta R^2 = .411, F(7, 143) = 14.24, p < .001$			

Note: WDQ = Worry Domains Questionnaire.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between self-actualization and everyday worry across multiple life domains. Consistent with our hypotheses, higher self-actualization was strongly and negatively associated with overall worry, with particularly robust associations for interpersonal- and confidence-

related worry—domains perhaps most closely tied to self-concept, authenticity, and intrinsic motivation (Wilkins et al., 1977). These findings suggest that individuals who are more authentic, autonomous, and aligned with intrinsic values may experience fewer repetitive concerns about relationships, competence, and life direction. By contrast, associations between self-actualization and work- or finance-related worry were weaker and nonsignificant, indicating that these domains may be influenced more by situational or external constraints than by personal growth orientation. This domain-specific pattern underscores the importance of examining worry across different life domains rather than treating worry as a unitary construct (Hong, 2007).

Integration With Prior Research

These findings extend prior research on worry, which has largely emphasized its maladaptive features, such as intolerance of uncertainty, biased attention, and emotional dysregulation (Borkovec et al., 1998; Hirsch & Mathews, 2012; Wells, 1995). While these perspectives have generated important clinical insights, they have offered relatively little attention to protective or growth-oriented psychological resources. The present study suggests that self-actualization may serve such a protective role. Individuals higher in self-actualization may rely on adaptive coping strategies, maintain a sense of purpose, and view challenges as opportunities rather than threats (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), thereby reducing the likelihood that everyday concerns escalate into chronic worry.

These results align with research linking authenticity, self-determination, mindfulness, and self-compassion to reduced anxiety and greater well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Raes, 2010). By situating worry within a positive psychology framework, the study highlights the potential protective role of self-actualization, suggesting that growth-oriented qualities may buffer against worry by promoting adaptive appraisal, resilience, and purposeful engagement with challenges. This dual framing broadens existing theories: worry may best be understood not only as a vulnerability factor for psychopathology but also as a process shaped by higher-order motivational and personality systems, consistent with models of human flourishing (Maslow, 1970; Ryff, 1989). Embedding worry research within frameworks of human development and flourishing underscores the potential of interventions that foster authenticity, resilience, and self-concordant goals (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

Measurement Considerations

From a methodological perspective, the study also provides construct validation for the Short Index of Self-Actualization (SISA; Jones & Crandall, 1986) and the Worry Domains Questionnaire (WDQ; Tallis et al., 1992). Specifically, the observed correlations aligned with theoretical expectations and had generally adequate internal consistency. These psychometric findings reinforce the suitability of the instruments for nonclinical samples and highlight their value in examining positive and negative psychological processes simultaneously.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant careful consideration. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; although self-actualization was interpreted as protective against worry, it is also plausible that high levels of worry undermine individuals' capacity to pursue growth and authenticity over time. Longitudinal and experimental studies are necessary to clarify directionality. Second, reliance on self-report measures introduces the possibility of response biases, including social desirability effects (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). Future research could incorporate behavioral assessments, peer ratings, or physiological measures to triangulate findings. Third, the sample consisted primarily of traditional-age undergraduates from a single institution, limiting generalizability to other populations or life stages. For instance, worry about finances and work may be experienced differently by older adults with broader occupational and

family responsibilities. Given that cultural values influence both worry and conceptions of self-actualization, more diverse samples are warranted (Ridley et al., 2022). Fourth, the SISA demonstrated modest internal consistency ($\alpha = .67$), consistent with prior reports (Jones & Crandall, 1986), suggesting that future research might consider additional or alternative measures of self-actualization to strengthen reliability.

Finally, the mechanisms linking self-actualization to reduced worry remain to be tested. Self-actualization may operate by fostering adaptive coping, enhancing mindful awareness, or increasing tolerance of uncertainty. Evidence from previous research suggests that structured growth processes can cultivate competencies that counteract worry (Chow et al., 2015; Hill et al., 2021). Testing these mechanisms would clarify how self-actualization translates into lower levels of everyday worry.

Theoretical Implications

Traditionally, worry has been conceptualized within clinical frameworks emphasizing cognitive biases, intolerance of uncertainty, and avoidance processes, positioning worry primarily as a maladaptive mechanism that maintains anxiety and related disorders (Borkovec et al., 1998; Dugas et al., 1998; Hirsch & Mathews, 2012). While this perspective has generated important clinical insights, it provides limited guidance on how individual strengths and positive psychological qualities might buffer against repetitive or intrusive concerns. The present findings highlight the importance of integrating a positive psychology lens, demonstrating that self-actualization—rooted in authenticity, growth, and alignment with intrinsic values—was consistently associated with reduced worry across multiple life domains (Maslow, 1970; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

By situating worry within a framework of human flourishing, these results suggest that developmental strengths may mitigate the impact of everyday stressors and repetitive cognition. In particular, interpersonal- and confidence-related worry appeared most sensitive to self-actualization, indicating that growth-oriented qualities exert their strongest influence on concerns tied directly to self-concept and personal efficacy. Conversely, the weaker associations observed for work- and finance-related worry highlight the limits of personal growth in domains heavily influenced by external constraints, underscoring the value of domain-specific analyses (Hong, 2007).

Practical Implications

This dual framing of worry—as both a vulnerability and a process shaped by higher-order motivational systems—offers practical insights. Interventions designed to foster self-actualization may complement traditional cognitive-behavioral approaches by targeting growth-oriented motivation rather than focusing exclusively on symptom reduction. Programs grounded in humanistic principles or self-determination theory could promote both personal development and the attenuation of worry, enhancing resilience, adaptive coping, and psychological well-being simultaneously (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

Concluding Summary

In sum, the present findings integrate traditional clinical perspectives with positive psychology, illustrating that worry is not only a marker of vulnerability but also a process influenced by higher-order strengths. By demonstrating that self-actualization predicts reduced worry—particularly in domains closely tied to self-concept—the study provides a nuanced understanding of individual differences in worry. These insights underscore the potential for interventions that cultivate authenticity, resilience, and self-concordant goals, offering pathways to enhance well-being while mitigating the impact of everyday worry. Cultivating self-actualization—through authenticity, intrinsic goal alignment, and growth-oriented engagement—may

serve as a protective factor against everyday worry, complementing traditional approaches that target anxiety symptom reduction.

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